

Arms Control in Soviet-US Relations -  
Missed Opportunities and Lessons to  
Be Drawn

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Mr. Muskie,  
Mr. Newsome,  
Mr. Raish,  
Mr. Crow,  
Mr. Laboulaye,  
Mr. Chairman,  
Friends and colleagues,  
Students of University,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I first be allowed to express my profound gratitude to the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and its President, Mr. Edmund Muskie, for bestowing upon me a Georgetown University Jit Traynor Award.

After a several-year tour of duty as Charge d'Affaires, in 1962 I was appointed Soviet Ambassador to the United States when the Cold War was at its peak and stayed in Washington for the better part of a quarter of a century until 1985. During that period, I witnessed many developments and gained a great deal of experience. I had a chance to collaborate with quite a ~~number~~ of outstanding US politicians and diplomats, among them all US Presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to George Bush, all Secretaries of State from John Foster Dulles to James Baker, all Presidential National Security Advisers from McGeorge Bundy to Brent Scowcroft. Being colorful personalities in their own right, each of them deserves a separate story in the context of the history of Soviet-US relationship. I still keep bright

memories of my contacts with many of them. Of course, Soviet-US summit meetings constituted watershed events. I attended 12 such meetings, in other words, all postwar Soviet-American summits with the exception of the Potsdam Conference.

In this presentation, I can not, of course, deal with all that long and politically intensive period.

Instead, with your permission, I will share with you some ideas on a more specific but quite relevant subject - namely, "Arms Control in Soviet-US Relations - Missed Opportunities and Lessons to Be Drawn." covering the period under discussion.

In analyzing and assessing the lessons of the past, we must bear in mind the then existing nature and system of power, and also specific historic developments that stood in the background of individual foreign policy decisions.

In the absence of precise analysis, simple discussion of the past would border on vulgar vilification. Therefore, we need to approach historical events in all their variety, all their dark and bright spots, their positive and negative implications notwithstanding.

We have to turn back to our past to be able to realize that we have received a difficult heritage, to find out what we can built on and what we have to discard.

Already now, we can say with full certainty that our decisions on quite a few issues proved clearly erroneous. But there are other issues, other "blank spots," which can be clarified and corrected only on a bilateral basis.

Dominating all other aspects in Soviet-US relations was an ideological conflict, the effort to deny the other side legitimacy or the right of the social system of your "adversary" to existence. The doctrines of "rolling back communism" or "struggle with imperialism" ruled out any chance of normal development of relations between the two countries, a life-or-death struggle was held to be inevitable, as a clash of ideological absolutes makes no room for compromises.

Given that situation, and in the light of World War II experience, when both the Soviet Union and the United States had fallen victim to sudden aggression, the two sides proceeded in advance to preparations for a military conflict. Being more powerful economically and technologically, the United States took the lead in the arm race, but the Soviet Union proved capable of mastering its own resources so much so as to create the threat of retaliation to the United States.

Following Stalin's death and the initiation of Khrushchev's reforms, it became possible for the first time to review the Cold War concepts, as Khrushchev recognized not just the possibility of but also the need for peaceful coexistence of states with opposite social-economic systems.

Although endorsed by the 20-th Party Congress as a formal Soviet foreign policy doctrine, that postulate failed to make any noticeable impact on our relations at the time.

In the 1950s, when the United States lost its nuclear monopoly, although the parity had yet to be established, US territory for the first time in American history became vulnerable to a devastating nuclear-missile strike. As a result, a situation began to take shape, which in the event of war could lead to a "mutually assured destruction".

The prospect of nuclear impasse for the first time called into question the expediency of continuing and unrestrained arms race and offered a chance of halting or at least slowing down the pace of the Cold War.

Khrushchev and Eisenhower did make some, though tentative and contradictory, attempts to that end. The first such attempt fell on 1955 during the Geneva summit meeting which generated the "Geneva spirit" and enabled the two sides to put forward sufficiently far-reaching plans of radical cuts in conventional armed forces, even if those plans were, in large measure, propaganda-oriented. Another attempt was made in the late 1950s, when a moratorium on nuclear testing was announced and Khrushchev paid a visit to the United States.

But the effect of all those attempts was cancelled out by the Berlin crisis, by the U-2 incident and other similar developments, but mostly by a total lack of trust between the two countries.

Incidentally, it was during that period that Eisenhower put forward his famous "open skies" proposal, which now, on President Bush's initiative, is once again on the agenda of our relations and stands a chance of success. But at that time, and I can tell you all about it now, the Politburo meeting, called to consider Khrushchev's suggestion that the proposal be accepted, voted it down right away, because the other Politburo members saw in it an overt bid to legitimize spying against the Soviet Union. True, Khrushchev himself was bluffing to an extent, as what he looked forward was a major propagandistic gain since he was absolutely sure that the US Congress would not allow even for a hypothetical possibility of seeing Soviet inspection aircraft appear in US skies.

The 1962 Caribbean Crisis marked one of the most critical developments of the 20-th century. More than ever before, it pushed the world to the brink of nuclear abyss. The crisis taught us a major lesson as to what had to be done in subsequent years to prevent nuclear war. In hindsight, if you wish, the Caribbean Crisis provided an incentive for new thinking in the nuclear age - something that we failed to grasp at the time.

Personally, the days of the Caribbean Crisis proved to be the most dramatic and memorable days in my entire career as Soviet Ambassador to the United States, and understandably so. I still recall very well the enormous tension that gripped all Embassy officials who were intensely watching sequences shown on American TV as one of Soviet ships

carrying Cuba-bound cargo was approaching the imaginary line drawn by President Kennedy, which, if crossed, would imply violation of the President-announced quarantine against Cuba and thus call for the use of American military power against the violator. In an emotion-choked voice, a US TV announcer was counting down the miles separating the Soviet ship from the line beyond which it could be shelled or bombed. Four, two, one mile left - will the ship stop or not? Finally, the ship crossed over the line but the US naval vessels, shadowing the Soviet ship and complying with a last-minute order, held their fire and allowed the Soviet ship to continue on its way to Cuba. There was a general sigh of relief at seeing the first real threat of an overt military conflict averted.

What followed were several days of feverish discussions between the two governments to which I happened to be privy. Normally, those discussions would bypass the State Department or the Soviet Foreign Ministry, as they were conducted through the President's trusted intermediary - his brother Robert Kennedy. We would meet daily, in the dead of night, at 2 or 3 a.m., alternating the meetings between the Soviet Embassy and the Justice Department which he headed at that time. With no interpreters or aides in attendance, we transmitted all major messages exchanged by the President and Khrushchev. Those nightly meetings with Robert Kennedy were tense as they reflected the overall tension of the situation. I recall that when I handed over to Robert

Kennedy Khrushchev's last message which sort of wound up the conflict, he remarked to me, "It looks like this is the first time I can go home feeling at ease, knowing that nothing bad can happen to my family".

What lessons for the future can we draw from the Caribbean Crisis?

First. The imminent threat of nuclear catastrophe brought home the realization that no individual country can expect to enhance its national security at the expense of diminished security of other countries. Furthermore, nuclear weapons are too dangerous to ever be used.

Second. In any tense situation, it is essential that we search for and arrive at mutually acceptable compromises, especially in the nuclear age. At the time of the Caribbean crisis, the agreement to withdraw missiles from Cuba, Turkey and Italy proved to be such a compromise, although it did not come in for a broad public knowledge.

Third. The need for direct contacts and highest level cooperation. Personally, Kennedy and Khrushchev played a key role in defusing the conflict.

And of course the Ambassadors should be informed completely on the whole matter from the very beginning.

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Fourth. Time factor. The peak period of the Caribbean crisis lasted for two weeks - a time framework that would be totally out of the question should a major crisis break out now. Robert McNamara told me later that had the U.S. administration been compelled to make a decision within the first 48 hours, the outcome might have proved totally different, as the administration might have opted for an air strike against Cuba with all the entailing unforeseeable consequences.

To illustrate my point about the gravity of the situation during the Caribbean crisis, I shall recount the following unknown but important part of that situation. It so happened that in the period prior to and during the crisis our Embassy in Washington did not have direct lines of telephone or radio communication with Moscow. Once encoded, all embassy messages were transmitted by a Western Union office based in Washington. Normally, they would send a young black man on a bicycle to pick up the messages and take them back to Western Union for transmission to Moscow. Of course, the odds were high that he would stop some place on the way to the Embassy for a snack, a chat with his girlfriend and the like, without giving much thought that he might be carrying some very urgent cables. That was the reason why in the decisive phase of the conflict a couple of messages Khrushchev addressed to Kennedy were conveyed simultaneously through me and



announced over Radio Moscow to make sure they reached the White House as fast as possible.

The shock produced by the Caribbean crisis gave a powerful boost to the Soviet-U.S. negotiating process.

The 1963 Treaty to End Nuclear Testing in Three Environments marked the first step toward effectively curbing the nuclear arms race. A major personal role in the successful outcome belonged to Averell Harriman, who at a crucial moment in the negotiations called President Kennedy directly by telephone from over meeting in Moscow to secure his agreement to the final wording worked out as a result of compromise. The Soviet delegation which was present was much impressed with such speed and the fact that the U.S. chief negotiator had direct access to the President.

No more than just a few people may know that in 1963 there was a real chance of formalizing a truly historic accord totally discontinuing all nuclear testing, for greater perseverance on either side could have made it possible to resolve the issue of underground nuclear tests, thus qualitatively freezing nuclear arsenals at the early 1960s level. Likewise, the development of new generations of nuclear arms, including MIRVed systems, the neutron bomb and other devices would have been banned, with a formidable

barrier rising in the way of nuclear arms horizontal proliferation. Quantitatively too, the buildup of nuclear arms would have been arrested. To think of it that all that could have been accomplished as early as 25 years ago!

But that major chance was missed. Therefore, instead of ending, the treaty no more than canalized the nuclear arms race into the channels where it still continues to develop, whereas a treaty on a total cessation of nuclear testing remains a rather distant goal.

From the vantage point of the current situation we can see that one of the main reasons which at that time made it impossible to agree to put a total end to nuclear testing would appear ridiculous if not tragic, as the important stumbling block proved to be the issue of whether there should be 3 or 7 on-site inspections per year. Many years later, professor Seaborg who acted at the time as head of the US nuclear energy department and the President's top adviser on the matter admitted to me that while he had succeeded in persuading President Kennedy that he should stand by the figure 7, deep in his heart he was quite sure that we both would back away especially since he himself held that the 7-inspection position was quite negotiable. But the legacy of stalinism, Soviet fears over allowing foreign monitoring in Soviet territory, which was seen in Moscow as a form of covert espionage, cut short the search for eventual compromises and played into the hands of those people in the United States

who had no interest either in verification or disarmament. That outcome was made even more predictable because of a heated debate under way in the Soviet Union and the United States on a highly contrived issue - namely, whether verification should be preceded by disarmament or *visa versa*.

So much for one of the concrete lessons to be drawn from old thinking.

In the "post-Cuban window," we similarly failed to come to understanding on another important problem - that of strategic stability. Intuitively, the two sides came to recognizing the grave threat posed by medium-range ground-launched missile deployments close to the borders of either side. In addition to Soviet agreement to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba, which we openly complied with, President Kennedy made a confidential commitment on behalf of the United States to withdraw American missiles from Western Europe (Italy, Turkey). But, fearing adverse reaction in the United States and NATO countries, the President stopped short of making a public commitment although he subsequently made good on his word within the agreed deadline.

And yet, should a mutual Soviet-US commitment not to deploy medium-range ground-launched missiles in proximity to the borders of either side have been formalized and publicly announced, we would have avoided another sharp conflict on the issue of "Euromissiles" that developed in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.

In this way, failure by both sides to formalize shared understanding of the notion of strategic stability resulted, two decades thereafter, in another, somewhat modified, grave crisis.

This is one more lesson from the past that is indicative of squandered opportunities.

It was as late as the end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s that the two governments grew aware, while negotiating the SALT-1 Agreement and the ABM Treaty, of the need to codify the arms control process.

In the course of the negotiations a compromise was arrived at, which helped to shape successful completion of the ABM Treaty - a document that to this day remains the cornerstone underlying the current strategic stability mechanism.

Regrettably, in the 1970s, the US side failed to demonstrate an equal measure of foresight and willingness to work for a ban on MIRVed systems - something that we proposed at the time. Apparently, Washington continued to bet on US military-technological superiority. While verbally recognizing strategic parity, the Nixon-Kissinger administration hoped to benefit from US qualitative edge and "win" the arms race.

True, the Soviet side equally failed to make its proposals on banning MIRVed systems sufficiently consistent. At that time, the Soviet Union held the principle of equal security to mean the need for developing "in mirror image" all the latest US military advances. Presumably, we still operated under the assumption that we would be able to "catch up with and overtake" the United States.

Meanwhile, from the standpoint of strategic stability, the early 1970s seemed to open very bright prospects before the two sides, as at that point in time neither the United States nor the Soviet Union possessed a disarming strike capability. What we saw develop in the subsequent period is a still continuing process of sliding further away from the level of strategic stability that existed in the early 1970s.

Paradoxically, the United States and the Soviet Union now tend to approach jointly that problem from a different perspective. They feel that in order to maintain strategic stability it is essential to remove first-strike incentives - something that can be achieved, among other things, by reducing the number of warheads carried by strategic delivery vehicles. Herein lies another lesson that we should draw from our most recent past.

As a result of those conceptual miscalculations, and starting with the mid-1970s, the nuclear arms race regained full momentum. The United States made the first move by MIRVing its missiles and developing a "counterforce strike" capability. But the move proved counterproductive, as the

Soviet Union, although belatedly, responded by MIRVing its own, more powerful missiles. By the end of the 1970s, Washington "discovered" the famous "window of vulnerability" in the US ICBM force, which became one of the main issues in the presidential race that brought President Reagan to the White House.

But the security of either side came out of the race diminished rather than strengthened. Such conceptual, I would even say strategic, miscalculations proved very costly for the budget of the two countries.

Likewise, the same traditional approach short of any elements of new thinking manifested itself when the Soviet side took the ill-advised decision to modernize its medium-range missiles.

As a result, billions upon billions of dollars and rubles had gone down the drain by the time the INF Treaty was signed and the elimination of medium- and shorter-range missiles began.

So much for yet another sad lesson to be drawn from the fatal arms race.

As we look back, we can see that the underlying causes for the failure of detente in the 1970s stemmed from the fact that, although slightly modified, the sharp ideological conflict existing at the time had not been put to rest. Soviet and American conservatives were still locked in a "win-or-lose" battle.

The Soviet-American ideological conflict was projected to regional situations across the world that was increasingly coming under the impact of the reverberations caused by the collapse of the system of colonial empires.

I should point out that since the time of the war in Vietnam the problem of linkage between regional conflicts and arms control consistently stood in the way of our efforts to put an end to the Cold War, as first the Soviet Union and then the United States began to make progress in arms control negotiations contingent on either side's behavior in regional conflicts. In other words, the issue of averting nuclear war began to yield precedence to geopolitical considerations that quite often left unaffected the vital interests of our two countries.

As a result, the talks on the SALT 2 Agreement, conducted with the Ford administration and calculated to correct the deficiencies of the SALT 1 Accord and thus impose constraints on nuclear arms qualitative modernization, turned out to be only partially productive, although on the whole the Vladivostok Accords marked a watershed of sorts in Soviet-U.S. relations.

The inauguration of the Carter administration, which comprised officials that called for an end of the Cold War and the initiation of the arms control process, offered certain chances for breaking the deadlock. But the stagnation of the Brezhnev leadership prevented the developments from taking a positive turn. Furthermore,

conflicting signals sent by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Presidential National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski on the subject of the SALT 2 Treaty, especially in the early stages of the Carter Administration, were wrongly perceived in Moscow as tantamount to outright abandonment by the new administration of the agreements reached under the previous administration.

Confounding the situation was the fact that during its first two years in office the Carter administration ~~was more~~ engaged with the Panama Canal Treaty than ~~with~~ the START negotiations. For its part, Soviet diplomacy unnecessarily laid excessive emphasis on arguments dealing with secondary issues, and the negotiations began to stall. As a result, the signing of the SALT 2 Agreement in 1979 in Vienna came too late, when negative trends began to dominate the Soviet-U.S. relationship.

In this way, we failed to take into account the factor of time, which, regrettably, did not militate then in favour of disarmament.

That the United States shied away from ratifying the SALT 2 Treaty dealt a powerful blow to the entire process of curbing the arms race, thus compelling the Soviet government to announce that Washington held cheap its commitments and the signature it had affixed to the documents that bore on a highly important issue of preventing the risk of nuclear war.

The ill-advised, hasty and erroneous decision that a narrow circle of officials in the Soviet leadership took to send in Soviet troops to Afghanistan returned us to the



bleakest days of the Cold War, giving once again a clearly ideological tinge to Soviet-American confrontation. In those circumstances, Moscow's failure to accept a compromise on the "Euromissiles" issue, which appeared at the time quite realistic, created over the long term a negotiating impasse and in 1983 cut short the Soviet-U.S. dialogue.

Consequently, in the first half of the 1980s, as a result of several erroneous decisions and moves on either side, the course at confrontation once again gained ascendancy in Soviet-American relations, making ideology and militaristic spirit reign supreme.

Only perestroika in the Soviet Union and the "new thinking" in foreign policy have drastically changed the situation.

Now the situation has ever more changed, because of a growing importance of a personal involvement at the highest level. It usually sets a certain time frame for the negotiating effort, because in many cases it is tied to a certain date set for a summit meeting of the leaders of the two countries. Those meetings became more frequent and regular. This new important element gives a large measure of stability and a sense of direction to our relations.

New political thinking also calls for the appearance of a new generation of diplomatic negotiators. In this connection, we have been compelled to revamp in a radical fashion the structure of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Quite a few people have been changed or pensioned. We

have eliminated the practice of appointing incompetent non-professionals from the outside as ambassadors. In the Foreign Ministry, serious structural changes have been made so as to concentrate work on some of the crucial areas, including disarmament, humanitarian issues, regional problems, bilateral relations and so on.

In view of the momentous nature of foreign policy issues, the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs is probably the only Soviet government agency that has not been affected by personnel cuts in the course of the ongoing perestroika in the country. The central office employs 3737 people, of whom roughly one half are career diplomats. The ministry's 203 foreign stations employ 9 036 officials.

New political thinking has made it possible to reverse confrontational trends and within an unprecedentedly short historical period break the existing deadlock in Soviet-American relations.

A new Statute of Soviet Diplomatic Service has been adopted in the light of the latest requirements.

The Soviet diplomatic corps has become much younger. Only 3 per cent have now age over 60 (pension age). Budget of the Ministry - 263,4 mln. rubles, including 151 mln. in hard currency.

There is hardly any need to dwell on every aspect of the new thinking, which since the mid-1980s came to dominate the political and philosophical concepts of Soviet foreign policy, or on relevant concrete steps in that area, including a consistent effort to improve our relations with the United States, which is an integral part of the overall course at perestroika.

I may just reiterate that our intention is to make diplomatic perestroika irreversible as well.

Starting with 1985, developments in Soviet-American relations, including those related to arms control, increasingly started to pick up pace. Summit meetings were called upon to play a special role to that end. Whereas during President Reagan's first term in office no such meeting took place and tensions in Soviet-American relations were at an all time high, in the course of his second term five summit meetings were held in Geneva, Reykjavik, Washington, Moscow and New-York (the latter held jointly with George Bush). Soviet-American relations began to show every sign of a clear shift away from confrontation to dialogue which now covers all the crucial issues of world politics and bilateral relationship.

I can tell you quite frankly that in 1985, when Soviet-American relations began to pick up speed, it was hard to imagine that just within a couple of years President Reagan, who had coined the now famous "evil empire" phrase, would come to Moscow to hold talks in the Kremlin, take a walk on the Red Square, stroll around downtown Moscow and chat with the Moscovites. This was a clear sign of not just his ability to demonstrate political realism but also of the rapidly changing world and the vast distance covered in Soviet-American relations.

Of course, some crucial issues still remain pending in Soviet-American relations, there are still many differences to be overcome. But politics is the art of the possible. Central to the Washington and the Moscow summits was the conclusion and the ratification of the INF Treaty. Marking a watershed event in the long process of disarmament negotiations, that Treaty constituted history's ever first agreement on the elimination of two categories of nuclear arms. The conclusion of the INF Treaty convincingly demonstrated that political compromise was a reality that made possible account of either side's interests.

The past months of 1989 have been a period of mutual adjustment for us and the new US Administration. A period when we were reviewing our political priorities, exploring alternative options and evaluating what is possible. Our conclusion is that further progress in building our relationship is possible. The two sides have been dealing with each other long enough to reach now for new frontiers.

The talks in Wyoming last September under the direct guidance of President Gorbachev and President Bush were a significant milestone in the Soviet-American dialogue. Both sides have shown themselves to be ready for a new phase in their relationship.

There is a new dynamism in our discussions of military and arms control issues. Core issues of both sides' security are being discussed in Geneva and Vienna. If we are able to speed up work at those negotiations, unprecedented opportunities will open up for us. There is reason to believe that important agreements could be signed next year.

US-Soviet relations have been further strengthened by the acknowledgement that the current Soviet reforms are compatible with US interests. It has been mutually recognized that the Soviet Union's new thinking in foreign and defense policies opens up opportunities that would have been inconceivable just a few years ago. As Secretary of State Baker put it, it would be sheer madness to miss those opportunities.

Both governments understand the need for continuous political dialogue and for a new effective mechanism of cooperation. The objective is not just to find solutions to the problems we face today by jointly devising new approaches and new policies but also to prevent new conflicts from arising.

What is particularly important is that our governments realize that the new phase in their relations is both extremely significant and highly delicate. This means that they must react to all events and developments affecting the interests of the other side with a heightened sense of responsibility.

It also means that they must avoid any action that could provoke the other side's suspicion or misapprehension.

In some regions the nature of developments is so complex and full of contradictions that some people in some countries might be tempted to use real or imaginary problems to their own advantage. But we must not allow the ambitions of those people to ruin the trust that has taken years to build in our relations or the stability which is so important nowadays in Europe.

As both our leaders recognize the importance of personal contacts between them for the development of US-Soviet relations, they concluded that they should hold a full-scale summit in Washington in the middle of next year. Later, however, the dynamics of the situation prompted them to speed up the process, and they announced an early informal meeting near Malta in the beginning of December. Their agreement to have this meeting is a timely decision. They intend to have a wide-ranging and frank personal exchange of views without a fixed agenda. They have much to talk about and discuss, including the fundamental aspects of the further development of Soviet-American relations.

President Bush put the need for this Malta meeting very eloquently when he said: I don't want two giant ships to miss each other in the night because of failure of communications.

The Mediterranean meeting and the Washington summit may lay down an important landmark in our relations. Working together and adjusting to new realities, both sides can be instrumental in enhancing stability and solidifying the overall framework of international relations.

Having proclaimed the policy of moving from "mutual understanding to mutual action", we can now take practical steps along that path.

Our leaders could also conduct an assessment of our strategic relationship in key areas in the next few years based on political common sense. This could be a good opportunity - perhaps for the first time in many years - for both sides to begin to try to predict and shape the future of our relationship.

Ladies and gentlemen,

"Missed opportunities and lessons to be drawn" was the main subject of my remarks to you today. As we look ahead, we recognize that many problems and serious differences remain

between us. But, given political will, they can and must be resolved.

Even the bitter past could become a prologue to a better future. It all depends on our foresight and determination to learn from the past and open a new chapter in our relations.

The opportunities missed today would be missed for a long time to come. Let us hope that this time the Soviet Union and the United States, their leaders and their people will not miss this historic chance.

Thank you for your attention.